

Senedd Cymru  
Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg

Ymchwiliad i effaith argyfwng Covid-19 ar blant  
a phobl ifanc yng Nghymru

COV 153  
Ymateb gan: Unigolyn

Welsh Parliament  
Children, Young People and Education Committee

Inquiry into the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on  
children and young people in Wales

COV 153  
Response from: Individual

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I am writing to you all because I passionately believe that schools need to open full time, for all students in September. It deeply saddens and angers me that it appears the Welsh government appear to be considering 'blended learning' the default option for September. This should be the emergency fallback only, for if and when local lockdowns and school closures are needed due to spikes in the virus or, if in the worst-case scenario, a full second wave of covid-19 calls for the need for wider school closures. The Welsh government should be doing everything in their power to promote the full reopening of schools in September, whereas it seems, at the moment they are trying to sell 'blended learning' to teachers and parents as a new and better approach. It is a completely inadequate option for all the reasons I will outline below, and will be letting down a whole generation of children.

You already know, so I won't provide links to the relevant evidence and studies here, that the virus is incredibly low risk to children. The vast majority of children are either asymptomatic or experience only mild symptoms. More children have died of complications arising from chicken pox in the last year and yet no one keeps their children off school when chicken pox is doing the rounds and neither do schools close, some parents even seek out opportunities for their children to get it! Therefore, it seems completely out of proportion to have school closures for covid-19 now that there is so much less of it in the community. There was the argument that children might be 'super-spreaders' of the virus, as they are with colds and flu, but this has been proven not to be the case; they are far less likely to transmit than adults, especially at primary age, so this is also not an argument for social distancing in schools. Today, there were only 24 new cases of covid-19 in the whole of Wales, and over the last few weeks the vast majority of cases have been centred around the food processing plants in Anglesey, Wrexham and Merthyr Tydfil. Outbreaks like these can be targeted and dealt with at a very local level, there is absolutely no excuse for the nationwide use of 'blended learning' and only having tiny amounts of students in school as a result of this. Many parts of Wales are seeing zero cases each day and yet their children are still being treated as high risk. There should be no need for

children to social distance at all. In terms of the risks to staff, which are still very low but obviously higher than to the children, school staff could social distance from each other, staff could aim to stay 1m + away from students where possible and where it is not minimise the length of time they are in close proximity to avoid the chance of contracting the virus, as it is known that it takes 15 minutes of being within 2m of someone to contract the virus from normal talking. Staff could be provided with clear face visors for things like one to one reading where they need to be closer for a longer period of time. Children should be able to go back to normal in terms of their interactions with each other, though. It is also worth remembering that when schools closed as part of lockdown it was not to eliminate the virus but to relieve pressure on the NHS to prevent it being overrun. The NHS is not in danger at all from this now, and given that case numbers are continuing to fall and should fall further over the summer, the partial school closures should not stand.

Purely from a practical point of view, the plan of 'blended learning' is ludicrous. The furlough scheme ends in October, more and more sectors of employment are returning to work, parents simply won't be able to stay at home with their children 3 or 4 days a week in September, unless you want mass unemployment and many parents to lose their sense of self worth and skill set? It seems as though there is a wish to see a return to stay at home mums and women without careers. I am a secondary school teacher in England, and as the UK government have seen sense and are sending all children back to school full time in September in England, I will have to go back to work 4 days a week, my husband, who also teaches in England, will be at work 5 days a week. Neither of us feel at risk and are looking forward to going back and doing our job properly. We won't have a choice, so what am I supposed to do with my children? Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of other people will be in the same position as me. You will force people who are not 'keyworkers' to use grandparents to look after the children which entirely defeats the object of these restrictions in the first place. These are the people who are more vulnerable to the virus, and yet they will have more exposure if schools are not fully open. Also, key workers like me would have to put their children back into school, as some had to during the lockdown. As, by September, this will be a large number of children, it is madness that schools don't just open properly. Also, this key worker childcare provision in schools is not education, I know this from being on rota in my own school for these children and also from hearing from parents who have used the hub in my child's school. It is just childcare, with no continuity of care as there are different staff on each day, leading the children to feel like no one really knows them or cares. The children don't get taught and so it has often been the case that their parents are

having to try to cram in home learning after long shifts at work when their children are also tired from being in the hubs all day. This is deeply unfair to those children.

The educational impact on the children is already huge and will become even more enormous if you choose 'blended learning' over full reopening in September. I am incredulous that you seem happy to throw children's education and futures under a bus for the sake of a virus which does not affect them. Why are they having to make this enormous sacrifice? I cannot believe that you will let the education of Welsh children fall so far behind that of their counterparts in England and Scotland. I know a lot of parents who live near the border will seek to get their children into English schools instead if you continue to pursue this deeply harmful policy. Many parents, even if they are able to still be at home in September with their children will be having to work from home, so won't be able to devote sufficient time to educating their children to do it adequately and provide them with the education they deserve. If they have to go out to work they will have to try to cram it in after work and not allow children the time they need to learn and explore new ideas. Also, parents are simply not qualified and don't have the skill set to provide a high-quality education to their children. I say this even as a teacher for my own children. I am a secondary teacher, but I feel completely inadequate to effectively teach my 8 and 4 year old, and make their work engaging, enjoyable and accessible. It is not what I was trained for, and I feel they deserve better. As for Welsh, which seems to be increasingly getting pushed in the Welsh curriculum, how do you expect most parents to be able to teach that effectively, when many know no or very little Welsh? Teaching is a very specialist profession that needs specific training to deliver each subject and for different age ranges. It is appalling that you are considering denying this expertise to our children for 4 days a week and expecting parents with varying levels of knowledge, skills, time and commitment to educating their children to fill the gaps. The very fact that you think this is adequate is frankly insulting to teachers and shows a lack of awareness of the skills and knowledge involved in teaching and learning. The use of 'blended' or 'distance learning' has already opened up huge educational inequalities, and this will only widen if this is allowed to continue in September. I cannot believe you are a government who are happy for already disadvantaged children have a gap open up that will be so wide that they will be disadvantaged socially and economically for life. Many children won't have parents prepared to put the time in to home learning. Many children from poorer families will have both parents working long hours, so they won't have the time and energy to do it properly. Many children have to share technology with working parents or siblings and they won't be able to access the resources that others in their class can. Children

in large families might lose out because their parents simply can't devote enough time to providing quality education to all their children. Some children are simply not engaged and won't be until they get the stimulation of a class room. Some live in disruptive, over-crowded homes where they don't have a suitable environment to work and learn in. The list goes on. The only fair thing to do, to provide all children with equal access to specialised, quality education is to get them back to school full time.

The social, emotional and psychological impact on children is already massive and will only grow if you stick to blended learning in September. This has already been evidenced by child psychologists. Firstly, the blurring of home and work life is very damaging to children. Home should be a place they can relax, and not have to worry about school work (at primary age at least) and school should be a place where they focus on learning. By merging the two settings you are putting huge pressure on family relationships as parents are forced to pressure their children to complete school work, rather than spending quality family time with them outdoors and learning through play and about wider life. Children are far, far more focused at school. I have seen this in my own child and also from talking to the students I teach. Therefore, to get the same amount of meaningful work out of them at home will take longer, and be stressful for child and parent, thus reducing the amount of family time that can be spent with each other. This will be even more exaggerated for working parents who will have to spend nearly all their time at home trying to home school their children, leaving no time to simply be parents and children. Generally children respect teachers as educators but not parents, again leading to strained relationships. All of this will cause so much damage to family life, and a parent's role is getting blurred. Social distancing has been proven to be psychologically damaging to children and is going to be detrimental to their physical, social and emotional development. Children need to be able to get close to each other for proper interaction. They need to be close to their friends. My own children, and those of my friends, have missed their friends at school desperately. Children are suffering from loneliness. This will be so much worse for only children who have had not siblings to properly play with for months. Children, especially those in Foundation Stage, learn and develop through play and countless opportunities for this are being denied through social distancing. Children need all the sporting and cultural aspects of school too, especially those that are less academically inclined, and there is a danger the curriculum will become very narrow and uninspiring if social distancing continues in schools. Team sports need to return for children to develop cooperation, team work and leadership skills. School plays and concerts need to return so students can develop creatively. If this continues there will be a whole generation of people robbed of

opportunities to succeed and find their passion. On top of all of this there is the very serious fact that while school remains optional and a once weekly event for children, many children suffering from abuse and neglect will go overlooked. This is already happening, and with the pressures of work, home-schooling and families together all the time, this problem will increase. For many children, children who lived in all sorts of disadvantaged homes, children who are home carers etc, school is their safe place, their place of normality, routine, social outlet and fun. How can you deny this to them for a virus that poses a negligible risk to them? Even looking at the population as a whole, the survival rate is so very high, would you really do all this damage to children for it? As for children who are shielding, money and thought needs to be given to them now to enable them to also have access to school e.g. live streaming of lessons, opportunities through gaining extra space and tutors to allow them to have some lessons with small groups of shielding peers where social distancing can happen, extra online or one to one tuition for shielding children having to learn at home whose parents may not be able to offer them all they need. Their needs are important and need to be addressed but it is madness to deny the entire population of Welsh children a school-based education for the few who cannot attend. Be creative instead. There has always been children who cannot attend school due to serious illness, disability or mental health problems. It is up to schools and the state to make education accessible to them, but it has never been assumed that all children should miss out on school for the few who cannot attend, so why on earth would that be the case with those shielding from covid-19?

It upsets me so much that my 4 year old has already been robbed of the end to his time in nursery and the transition to primary school that he should have been entitled to. The thought that he could now be denied the opportunity for a proper school education, learning through playing with his peers makes me want to cry. It has been hard enough seeing how desperate my 8 year old was to go back to school, how happy he was when it was announced that Welsh schools would go back on June 29th only to see the disappointment on his face when he was told it would only be one day a week. He said all he wants is to go back to 'proper learning in school' to see his friends and to play football again. Normal things. Things every child should be entitled to. How can you possibly deny Welsh children these things for a virus which has such low prevalence in the community and poses less risk to children than chicken pox and flu. It is cruel. By all means get schools to prepare robust systems for 'blended learning' should the worst happen and more school closures are needed in the winter, but don't prepare for this to be the 'new normal' in September. It is a fall-back option and a last resort only because it bears no comparison to proper school-

based learning and is woefully inadequate in all regards. It will also leave the Welsh government seeming uncaring towards children compared to their counterparts in the other UK nations. It will make them appear backward looking, not wanting to create the best opportunities for the future generations of Wales or Welsh economic growth. It will make Wales the laughing stock of the UK, and this time round the accusation that education in Wales is behind the rest of the UK would be more than deserved. I implore you to put children first and open schools full time to all children in September.

A very concerned parent and teacher,